

WMA General Assembly, Santiago 2005

Inaugural Presidential Address Dr. Kgosi Letlape

Honourable Minister of Health Dr Pedro Garcia, the President of the Chilean Medical Association Dr Castro, Honoured Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen

Thank you for the privilege you have given me to serve as President of the World Medical Association. I assume this role on behalf of all physicians on earth, but please indulge me as I particularly single out my brothers and sisters of Africa.

I would firstly like to congratulate Dr. Yank Coble on an extraordinary Presidency. Through his Presidential initiative of “Caring Physicians of the World”, he has managed to re-establish the fundamental values of medicine – caring, ethics and science. Together with the book on caring physicians, he has succeeded in making us feel good about being doctors again – so Yank, thank you again for your leadership, dedication and commitment to our profession. I find it a humbling experience to follow you as President and hope that I will be able to rise to the occasion.

Ladies and Gentlemen, an old Israeli saying states that you have to look back to where you have come from, to better see where you are heading. Looking back over the last few years, it is gratifying to note that the WMA has unquestionably grown into the representative voice of physicians. The World Health Organization, World Bank and other UN agencies turn to the WMA if they need

to hear the views of physicians. Through our alliance with the International Council of Nurses, International Pharmaceutical Federation and the World Dental Federation we have also been able to make major breakthroughs in the field of public health.

Within the WMA there have also been very positive developments. Our role as the custodians of medical ethics has been reinforced by the successful revision of the Declaration of Helsinki and the launch of the WMA Ethics Manual. The impact of the manual has been immediate and very significant. From its publication in January this year, it has now already been distributed worldwide and translated into at least 12 languages.

The WMA's recent contributions in health related human rights have also been welcomed by my compatriots from Africa, we cannot encourage the WMA enough to help physicians to be involved as the advocates and protectors of patients and the vulnerable groups in society. It will be part of my Presidential plan to help push forward our health-related human rights agenda.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I see the future role of the WMA as more and more that of social leaders, in addition to our role as the leaders of the health care teams. I would like to tell you three stories from the North, South and East to illustrate this point.

In the East we currently have an outbreak of avian flu. You will remember that in 2003 the world endured the SARS epidemic, where hundreds of patients died in China, Taiwan, Singapore and Canada. At the time the WMA argued strongly for the

establishment of a global surveillance and response network which would include front line physicians. In addition, the WMA called for Taiwan to be included in the WHO surveillance and response network, as they are a separate health entity, not receiving any funding or assistance from China. Here we are in 2005, with avian flu posing as a possible disaster of a proportion we have not seen since the Spanish Flu epidemic in 1918, when millions died. Yet we do not have a fully functional network where physicians and medical associations are directly linked to WHO. The gap in the global public health network, Taiwan, a country with 23 million citizens, has not been addressed yet. If avian flu is transmitted from China to Taiwan, as had happened with SARS, there are still no formal channels open between WHO and Taiwan to exchange technical data and provide help. Clearly we need to be more vocal and active as social leaders to make sure that all measures can be taken to include all the peoples of the world in preparing for health disasters.

The UN commanding Officers in Rwanda General Dallaire said that after shaking hands with the devil in Rwanda he knows there is A GOD. Noting that SARS never came to Africa in 2003 I have also come to know fully that GOD is there for all of us

I offer you another story from my own continent. Last year the fundamentalist governor of Nigeria's Kano State halted all polio immunisation efforts because of alleged and unsubstantiated claims that it was part of a plot to sterilize Muslim girls. By the time he relented, polio had spread to 12 African countries that had previously been freed of the disease, and thereby dramatically

setting back global eradication efforts and forcing the rest of the world to continue vaccination programmes. Another classic example of where politics ruled over health imperatives. Where were we, the physicians of the world, in preventing this kind of disaster? Colleagues, we can and should prevent this from happening again!

In Northern Europe over the last year, physicians have expressed their severe dissatisfaction with the new trend of rationing of care, ever increasing paper work, work hours and diminishing remuneration. This led to protest actions in France, Germany and Belgium. As governments find it difficult to fund health care services (from the patients' own money), rationing has increasingly been used to balance accounts. This has placed great pressure on the patient-physician relationship and physician autonomy. In September Belgian doctors protested against a proposed new government policy, whereby the Ministry of Health could intervene whenever the country's health insurance budget goes into deficit, effectively being able to exclude financial benefits for certain types of diagnosis or treatment. What is in fact happening is that health care is being dumped down to the lowest common denominator of cost. Even more importantly, rationing is slowly destroying the art and professional practice of medicine, the patient-physician relationship and patient access to all treatment options. Physicians are expected to act as administrative clerks and accountants and their professional role downgraded to select the least expensive, not the best [available](#), treatment for their patients.

Ladies and gentlemen – this trend of political considerations denying our patients the best possible health care services - is unacceptable. We cannot allow politics to stand in the way of effective handling of epidemics or disasters affecting both national and international levels. It highlights the fact that physicians need to become more effective in shaping the health policy environment, rather than be shaped by it.

As I mentioned before, the last WMA Presidency very effectively re-affirmed the fundamental values of medicine. During my term as President, I would like to place the focus on patient-centred medical care. As physicians we can draw encouragement from the fact that patients still regard us as the most trusted source of health information, but as communicators we can do much better. Patients are overawed with the information they can now source from the internet, but recent reports show that physicians still don't communicate effectively enough with our patients. During my term I hope that we can revisit our policy on patient information and communication and develop a training manual on the subject – as we have done so successfully for ethics and human rights. We must remember that always that our responsibilities come before our rights.

We have two themes in the vision of the World Medical Association, these are ETHICS and ACCESS. Whilst we have been in the forefront on ethics, there is still a lot to be done on access. We have collective responsibility globally to ensure access to basic healthcare for all citizens of the world. The Millennium Development Goals are being rolled back on and those

that are needing help are not necessarily receiving it. Globally, healthcare is being under funded and physician autonomy is interfered with thus undermining patients' rights. Doctors thus need to work together with civil society to create a safer world that can fund health care appropriately.

Ladies and gentlemen, I come from South Africa, the epicentre of the HIV and AIDS epidemic. Therefore I would like to close with an impassioned plea for the WMA and all its members to fully take on the responsibility of combating HIV. This is still a growing disease, where the role physicians can and should play has not been optimized. This is especially true for our role in prevention. So far only a limited number of full scale prevention efforts have been developed which effectively target at risk populations, the infrastructure of health systems, societal attitudes and individual beliefs and motivations.

Remember prevention in HIV and AIDS is ABCD, the four letters of the alphabet collectively and in the proper sequence; selective application of the alphabet is hazardous to the health of the people.

We need to ensure that our doctors are trained appropriately to fulfil the role that they play as leaders and healers. Medical schools train them to be great healers; we need to find a way to appropriately train them to be great leaders too. We need a program to assist National Medical Associations to get doctors to be good leaders as well. I will dedicate my year as president to

realise this objective as a follow-on to caring physicians so that we can emulate those caring physicians and truly put our patients first.

There are three things to remember:

1. Health is political even for doctors but we will be non-partisan and engage others as opposed to confronting them.
2. Health is a foundation for peace, not a bridge, for as we saw in the aftermath of Katrina, bridges were swept away but the foundations remained.
3. A quote from Nelson Mandela: "After climbing a great hill, one finds that there are many more hills to climb".

Having seen the hills and mountains of Chile, I wonder if Mr Mandela ever lived in Chile.

I would like to end by thanking our hosts, the Chilean Medical Association for their unforgettable warmth and hospitality during this Assembly. We are inviting you to our Assembly in South Africa next year where we will try to emulate them.

Muchas Gracias.